The Global Education Reform Movement: Is it Working?

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Abstract:

This is a review of the book *Global Education Reform: How Privatization and Public Investment Influence Education Outcomes* that examines the outcomes from two types of models – the GERM approach and the public investment model. The public investment model is one where the state invests in, and regulates the public education system to ensure resources reach all students equitably. The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) is one that champions private alternatives, individual choice, and competition between schools. In this review, I discuss how a major omission is that none of the countries discussed are as geographically populous or economically constrained as many developing countries. However despite its gaps, there are important lessons for countries that may want to limit the spread of GERM.

Keywords: Education reform, PISA, GERM, Neoliberalism, Public investment. Book review

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Introduction

Until the late 1980s, Sweden's education system resembled its Finnish neighbor in that it followed a comprehensive model that emphasized equality and opportunity for all (Åstrand, 2016). However, in the 1990s with a mounting economic crisis, Sweden redesigned its welfare-based system to a market-oriented model, one that championed private alternatives, individual choice, and competition between schools, which are symbolic of what is termed the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Adamson & Åstrand, 2016). GERM refers to a set of market-oriented policies, which typically include school choice and competition, high-stakes testing, narrowing of curriculum, and the hire of under- or unqualified teachers. GERM is not a formal policy package, but a set of unofficial education reforms that many global stakeholders advocate for, to improve quality and performance (Tooley, 2009).

The book *Global Education Reform: How Privatization and Public Investment Influence Education Outcomes* examines the efficacy of this theory of action by looking at outcomes from two types of models – the GERM approach and the public investment model. The public investment model is one where the state invests in, and regulates the public education system to ensure resources reach all students equitably. In this review, I will first explain how the book examines a comparison of countries who have either pursued the GERM approach or the public investment model. Second, I will discuss how a major omission is that none of the countries discussed are as geographically populous or economically constrained as many developing countries, where it is not as easy to write off the role of the private sector because of the extent of education that needs to be delivered. Third, I conclude by noting how, despite its gaps, there are important lessons for countries that may want to limit the spread of GERM.

Strong Arm or Invisible Hand?

In *Global Education Reform*, the editors look at the ideological spectrum in organizing education, from the extremes of strong state handling of public education, to just relying on the invisible hand through markets. The evolution of GERM is examined in Sweden, the United States, and Chile, while the public investment model is analyzed in Finland, Ontario, and Cuba. GERM advocates point to a market-based model being able to encourage efficiency and improve performance in ways that governments cannot. Conversely, public investment advocates point to the constant underfunding of schools, and argue that targeting investments towards high-need students is a better way to make the system equitable than introducing private actors.

The book compares the education systems in six countries, strategically organized in three pairs. The countries selected span three continents, showing the breadth and relevance of this debate in comparative education (Appendix A). The country pairs are organized by geographic and cultural proximity, but also by the pursuant of diametrically opposite strategies. This is a revealing approach as it allows for an analysis that can look at the historical trajectory within an individual country, contrast of the approaches taken by neighboring countries, and a comparison of countries that have pursued similar policies, but on different continents. Through their multi-country approach the editors conclude the theory of action of GERM has failed, in that it has neither improved education performance nor efficiency, which is a persuasive argument when one considers the results presented from across the globe.

What's Missing

None of the countries examined are as demographically young, or economically constrained relative to its population as for example India, where in 2008 just its 8 million out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2011), was close to the entire population of Sweden (9 million) (Statistics Sweden, 2018). Providing a quality education for all children with a GDP per capita of only US $1940, as India has, is a huge mandate to fulfil (World Bank Open Data, 2017).

Another facet to consider is that almost 30 percent of India's 1 billion people is below 15 years of age (World Bank, 2018), which means that there is a narrow base of working-age citizens who can fund public revenues for education. India's tax-to-GDP ratio is extremely low as well, reflective of its inability to mobilize revenue from direct and indirect taxes (World Bank, 2015). In such a scenario, it is not easy to write off the role of the private sector because of the magnitude of education such nations have to deliver, in comparison to existing resources.

Since equity is used to demonstrate the strength of an education system in the book, the recent history of colonialism is also an important facet to consider, which is missing from the analysis. Under British colonial rule, public education was massively underfunded in India, with public spending on human capital the lowest in the world between 1860-1912 (Chaudhary, 2009). Chaudhary and Garg (2015) have also found such unbalanced colonial investments have continued to influence India's post-independence literacy outcomes, well into the twentieth century, despite major public investment in education in independent India. It would have been efficacious for the editors to consider contexts like India, where simply strong public investment may not have been enough to counter the debilitating effects of its colonialist history.

Conclusion

Global Education Reform demonstrates well that the market cannot be relied on to produce either quality or equity. However, a critical missing element is the consideration of lower-income countries that face economic challenges to educate its citizens, while simultaneously dealing with the lingering effects of colonialism. Regardless of this missed opportunity, *Global Education Reform* holds important lessons. The experience of Sweden for example, acts as a cautionary tale in that its leaders had not thought through the extent to which private organizations could end up replacing public schools, instead of just acting as an alternative. This book is an important read for policy makers and education scholars to dig deeper into how market-oriented models tend to produce socially inequitable outcomes. These outcomes are by no means inevitable, and nations can craft policies to ensure the private sector works in collaboration with, rather than replaces, the responsibility of the state in providing quality education for all.

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